

DID LUKE HAVE ACCESS TO TRADITIONS  
ABOUT THE APOSTLES AND THE EARLY CHURCHES?

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Drawing on the work of Martin Dibelius<sup>1</sup> (1887-1947), Ernest Haenchen, in his justly famous commentary on The Acts of the Apostles, which has only recently appeared in English dress, argues that it is highly unlikely that "Luke" had similar sources available for the writing of Acts as he did when he wrote his Gospel.

The Apostles and other Christian missionaries did not proclaim their own words and deeds, but those of the Lord Jesus. Hence no tradition corresponding to the Synoptic had formed with reference to Paul and the Apostles. . . . Those who naively believe that Luke went to work with Acts in exactly the same way as with his gospel fail to notice that their opinion rests on an untenable assumption: there just were no "histories of the Apostles" which Luke could have woven together as, in the case of the third gospel, he wove together Mark, Q, and that other gospel from which he derived his special material.<sup>2</sup>

This basic assumption that there were no traditions concerning the apostles has been very influential in recent Lucan studies, but it has been challenged by the professor of New Testament at the University of Oslo, Jacob Jervell. Jervell's important essay appeared first in German in 1962,<sup>3</sup> but it has thus far received little notice in the scholarly world.<sup>4</sup> Because of both the strength of the case for which he argues and the implications of his conclusion for Lucan studies, it seems appropriate to draw special attention to his contribution through the pages

1. Out of print for a good many years, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, the English translation of Dibelius' essays on Acts (edited by H. Greeven and translated by M. Ling, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1956), has recently been re-issued in paperback by SCM.
2. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, Eng. trans. (Oxford: B. H. Blackwell Ltd., 1971), pp. 81-82.
3. "Zur Frage der Traditionsgrundlage der Apostelgeschichte," *Studia Theologica* 16 (1962), pp. 25-41: now available in English as "The Problem of Tradition in Acts" in his *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972).
4. Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday and Company, 1967), pp. XXXIX-XL, is the exception.

of this journal in the hope that it will become known to a wider circle of New Testament students.

In seeking to find out whether there is, in fact, any evidence for the view that Luke might have had access to traditions about the apostles and the earliest churches, Jervell turns to those New Testament documents which are closest to the primitive church, the Pauline letters. Recognizing that they are only occasional writings which treat special problems in the Pauline churches and that they should not be expected to contain an abundance of relevant material, he examines them to see what evidence there might be, and the results are rather startling.

First, there are a number of places where Paul indicates that the establishment of a Christian congregation is part of the missionary proclamation as well as a result of it. For example, in Romans 1:8 Paul thanks God for the Roman church "because your faith is proclaimed (*katangelletai*) in all the world." The verb *katangello* in Paul (used 7 times) is always used in a kerygmatic sense and is similar in meaning to *kerysso* and *evangelizomai* (cf. I Cor. 2:1; 9:14; 11:26; Phil. 1:17-18; Col. 1:28). This makes it clear that he regards the faith of the Roman church (i.e. the story of their conversion and present Christian experience) as constituting an element in the kerygma. Similarly, in I Thessalonians chapter one, Paul says much the same thing about the Thessalonian church. He gives thanks for the faith, love and hope of the believers in Thessalonica (1:2-5); then he states that they have become an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1:7). Then he adds:

*aph hymon gar exechetai ho logos tou kyriou ou monon en te Makedonia kai [en te] Achaia, all' en panti topo he pistis hymon he pros ton theon exelolythen, hoste me chreian echein hemas lalein ti (1:8).*

There is a grammatical difficulty here, but the most natural interpretation would equate *ho logos tou kyriou* with *he pistis hymon* (cf. verse 5), thus identifying the story of the success of the apostles among the Thessalonians and their resulting conversion to the living and true God to await the parousia and deliverance from the coming judgment through Jesus (1:9-10) as part of the early Christian preaching.

The same basic pattern is confirmed by 2 Corinthians 3:1-3. Here Paul asserts that he needs no letter of recommendation in the usual sense to validate his ministry, because he has one in the Corinthian congregation, who are written on his heart, *ginoskomene kai anaginoskomene hypo panton anthropon*; that is to say, everyone has heard that the Corinthian congregation came to faith through the ministry of Paul. The apostle goes on to say that this letter is in reality a letter of Christ to the whole world and the equivalent of what has been engraved on the hearts of the apostles by the Spirit of God, viz. the

gospel (as opposed to the law, which was engraved on stone tablets) (3:3). The same pattern appears also in Colossians 1:3ff., where Paul gives thanks for what he has heard from Epaphras concerning the faith and love of the Colossian believers, which, indeed, is a part of the gospel which is bearing fruit and growing (cf. Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20) in the whole world. And again in Paul's references to his "completing" (*pleroo*) the gospel of Christ (Rom. 15:19b) or the word of God (Col. 1:25b) he clearly indicates that he considers the story of the conversion of the gentiles through his preaching part of the kerygma. (Cf. also his references to grace, which grows when more receive it and becomes empty when it is rejected: 2 Cor. 4:15; 1 Cor. 15:10.)

There are also a significant number of places in Paul where he alludes to the fact that stories of the life in faith of a congregation are used for paraclesis and parenesis. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 1:3ff. Paul stresses that he boasts in the churches of God about the faith and steadfastness of the Thessalonian church in the face of persecution and affliction (cf. 2 Cor. 10:12-18). The experience of this church thus becomes a message of consolation to other churches, as it has been to Paul on another (earlier?) occasion when Timothy came to him and proclaimed the good news (*evangelisamenos*) of their faith and love (1 Thess. 3:6). The same thought is found in 2 Corinthians 7:4-13, where the life of the church at Corinth is reported to Paul and becomes God's own message of encouragement to him. Examples of parenetic use of stories from the life of the churches are: 1 Corinthians 8 and 9, where the response of the churches in Macedonia toward the collection for the saints in Jerusalem becomes an example to the Corinthians (ch. 8) and the Corinthians, to the Macedonians (9:1-4); Romans 16:17-19, where Paul warns the believers in Rome to beware of false teachers who might divide the church and lead it astray and reminds them that their obedience in this respect (i.e. in dealing with false teachers) is well-known to all (i.e. to the other churches); and the many places where Paul uses himself and his ministry as an admonition or parenetic word to the churches (1 Thess. 1:5-6; 2 Thess. 3:7ff.; Phil. 3:17; 1 Cor. 4:17; 11:1).

Finally, although the Jerusalem church does not belong to the missionary territory of Paul, it too has a place, indeed a very special place, in the kerygma of Paul and the other missionaries. The Thessalonian church has become a model for the churches of Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess. 1:7), but the original model was the Jerusalem church:

*hymeis gar mimetai egenethete, adelphoi, ton ekklesion tou theou ton ouson en te Ioudaia en Christo Iesou, hoti ta auta epathete kai hymeis hypo ton idion symphyleton kathos kai autoi hypo ton Ioudaion (2:14).*

Other passages emphasizing the priority of Jerusalem as an example in faith are Romans 15:25-27; 1 Corinthians 14:36 (Jerusalem is the church from which the word of God originally went out); 1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8:4 and 9:1, 12. Very important is 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, where the gospel—in a form which probably stems from the Jerusalem church itself—contains not only the report of Jesus' death and resurrection but also the report of the appearance of Jesus to Peter and the twelve, to a host of other (Jerusalem?) brethren, to James, and to other apostles. Added to this is the vast amount of data in the Corinthian epistles and in Galatians (especially chs. 1 and 2) which is unintelligible apart from the fact that the life of the Jerusalem church was well-known to all the other churches and *vice versa*.

Jervell does not exhaust the data of the Pauline letters which point in this direction, but he does give enough examples, I believe, to clearly demonstrate the incorrect nature of the Dibelius-Haenchen thesis that conditions were unfavourable for the formation of traditions about the apostles and the apostolic churches. In the Pauline churches, there was preaching about the missionary experiences of the apostles and about the establishment of churches; and the spiritual triumphs of the various churches were used for paracletic and parenetic purposes. In particular, a considerable amount of information concerning the life of the Jerusalem Church was available, and this was important to all the churches.

Having thus argued, questions concerning the extent and form of the traditions available to the author of Acts in his work and the use he made of them are left unanswered. But these are questions for another day.